

THIS REPORT CONTAINS ASSESSMENTS OF COMMODITY AND TRADE ISSUES MADE BY  
USDA STAFF AND NOT NECESSARILY STATEMENTS OF OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT  
POLICY

Voluntary    Public

**Date:** 6/13/2014

**GAIN Report Number:** BK1404

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Post:** Sarajevo

### Bosnia and Herzegovina Biotech Outreach Program

**Report Categories:**

Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals  
Biotechnology and Other New Production  
Technologies

**Approved By:**

Christine Sloop

**Prepared By:**

Sanela Stanojic

**Report Highlights:**

The Foreign Agricultural Service of the U.S. Embassy Sarajevo in cooperation with USAID's agricultural project FARMA and the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences conducted a series of biotech outreach activities, April 22-24. The program targeted Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) regulatory authorities and a group of small and medium-sized farmers to solicit their support for field trials of a biotech plum ("HoneySweet"). We believe that this activity directly contributed to improving the public perception and acceptance of agricultural biotechnology in BiH.

**Executive Summary:** The Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) of the U.S. Embassy Sarajevo in cooperation with USAID's agricultural project FARMA and the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences (FAFS) conducted a series of biotech outreach activities, April 22-24. The program targeted Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) regulatory authorities and a group of small and medium-sized farmers to solicit their support for field trials of a biotech plum ("HoneySweet"). Media was also present and this was the first time coverage was balanced and did not immediately vilify the technology. Romanian researcher, Dr. Ioan Zagrai, who is currently testing the "HoneySweet" plum at Romania's Fruit Research Station in Bistrita and Dr. Fuad Gasi, FAFS' lead on the proposed BiH field trials, as well as the US Embassy's Agriculture Counselor Christine Sloop, met with local and State regulators and other key government officials whose support would be needed to move forward with the field trials in Bosnia & Herzegovina. Dr. Zagrai also took the opportunity outline for FAFS the EU government approval process and to discuss the technical details surrounding the launch of a biotech field trial for this type of product. An immediate outcome of the outreach program was that it prompted the BiH authorities to call on May 13 an informal meeting of the Council for Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) to discuss the project and the body of information that might be needed to consider approving such a field trial. The GMO Council is an advisory body to BiH's Food Safety Agency (FSA). Both FSA and the local regulators asked the GMO Council for a preliminary opinion on the proposed field trials. It's too early to be certain if BiH authorities will eventually approve the trial, but thanks to the outreach program and the meetings that followed we believe the process is off to an auspicious start.

## **General Information:**

### **Background information**

In September 2013, FAS provided a US\$9,000 grant to the University of Sarajevo to carry out the preparatory work for field trials of a genetically engineered plum (the 'HoneySweet') and to begin seeking the approvals from the relevant BiH government agencies. The 'HoneySweet' plum was developed by a group of scientists led by Dr. Ralph Scorza from USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS). HoneySweet plums are genetically engineered to resist the plum pox virus, a disease that has had a significant adverse economic impact on an important local crop in BiH. ARS is currently working with the Fruit Research Station in Bistrita, Romania, on field trials. ARS and Sarajevo FAFS are working on an agreement to conduct a similar test in BiH. Currently, in addition to the research ARS is doing in the United States, there are agreements to carry out 'HoneySweet' plum field trials in Romania and the Czech Republic. Successful field tests have been completed in Poland and Spain. The FAS grant for the plum field trial was a follow up activity to an earlier EB funded outreach effort. In October 2012, EB funded a speaker program in which USDA/ARS Research Scientist, Dr. Ralph Scorza, and a Romanian Food Safety Expert, Mr. Felix Nicolescu, spoke to policy makers about research and regulation of biotechnology and discussed how biotechnology can be used to find solutions for minor crops, not just bulk commodities.

### **Impact on key decision and decision-makers**

This project's goal was to lay the ground work to ensure government and farmer support for the application to begin plum field trials in BiH. As noted, the project addresses a wide spread local problem with a specialty crop of economic importance and debunks the myth that GE field trials cannot

be conducted in Europe. It also provides an opportunity to test BiH's approval process to confirm that the requirements are reasonable and science-based. It's too early to know if the application will be successful, but the outreach program helped launch the process by prompting the BiH authorities to convene the GMO Council to discuss the field trial. Both the local and State level officials noted during meetings that they planned to rely on the GMO Council's guidance. The Agriculture Counselor and Dr. Gasi met with Professor Kasim Bajrovic, a member of the GMO Council and Director of the Institute of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (INGEB), and Adaleta Durmic Pasic, the Head of the GMO Lab to seek their good offices in the Councils' discussions. Prof Bajrovic arranged to have Dr. Gasi participate in the Council meeting to outline plan's for the field trial and to respond directly to questions. Although no final opinion was issued by the GMO Council at the May 13 meeting, the preliminary discussions were fruitful. The Agriculture Counselor also met with Sejad Mackic, Director of BiH Food Safety Agency to build support for the field trail project.

Both the public outreach events and the government meetings were aided by the fact that the speakers were credible, given their scientific backgrounds. Dr. Zagrai was able to provide the regulators a firsthand account of the EU review process and for the farmers to comment on whether there had been any "contamination" issues or any adverse publicity as a result of Romania's field trials. Dr. Gasi was able to provide the assurances of a local well-respected scientific institute, who is a regular partner in developing solutions for the agricultural community. The program should help incrementally in countering some of the miss-information circulating about this project. It will take a while to learn to what extent local opinions may have shifted; nevertheless, the outreach program definitely succeeded in improving the knowledge base of the audience and the government officials with whom we met. The respected speakers helped generate a constructive dialog about agricultural biotechnology and resulted in more positive publicity than this issue normally receives in the press. Dr. Zagrai's presentations were translated into local language, and a "Honey Sweet" brochure was distributed in hard copy to attendees.

### **Audience reached**

- The presentation/ roundtable discussion in Sarajevo included an "Overview of the Investigations of Transgenic Plums in Romania and Dossier Content" by Dr. Zagrai and an "Overview of the Planned Field Trial in BiH". There were 27 participants from the Food Safety Agency, the Federation of BiH Ministry of Agriculture, and Federation Agricultural Institute, Institute for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, municipal authorities and representatives of farmers. Thus, many of the relevant policy makers were present. The main questions posed by the audience related to how long it will take for the research results from the other field trials to become available and whether the 'HoneySweet' plum has been approved for commercial production in the European Union or the United States. There were also some questions about whether there were any negative effects observed in the bee population and what are the methods for pollen detection.
- The presentation/ roundtable discussion event in Tuzla was attended by 12 participants from the GMO Council, Agricultural Institute in Tuzla, Agricultural Institute in Banja Luka, and representatives from the farming community. The main questions related to plum resistance and production characteristics, and the environmental impact. The plum producers tabled their concern that a field trial might lead to a negative image for BiH's plum exports due to the

existence of a biotech plum plot in the main plum growing region.

- Separate meetings were scheduled with the senior leaders (director, deputy and advisor) from the BiH Plant Health Administration (PHA) and the Tuzla Canton Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Institute that would be directly involved in the approval of the plum trial. Dr. Zagrai and Dr. Gasi answered their questions regarding the pollen flow, precise location of the trial, time frame etc. The Tuzla Canton authorities expressed reservations about the possible negative effect on plum exports to Russia and the EU if a biotech plum were to be tested in one of BiH's premiere growing regions. However, both the PHA and the Ministry of Agriculture acknowledge that they would respect the recommendations provided by the FSA and the GMO Council.
- Dr. Zagrai's presentations were translated into local language, and a "Honey Sweet" brochure was distributed in hard copy to attendees.
- A field visit to the main plum growing areas of Srebrenik or Gradacac was planned but cancelled due to bad weather conditions.
- 

### **Analysis of whether the program influenced public perceptions**

The program highlighted the fact that biotech research can be done within the EU regulatory framework and stressed the opportunity for BiH to actively participate in a multi-country scientific research project that would allow BiH to benefit from a new technology that has already been positively accepted in several EU Member States. US interlocutors highlighted that the HoneySweet research is 100 percent financed by public funds and the technology could actually be used to help safeguard a local genetic resource from a devastating disease. Public perception is that biotech research only focuses on bulk commodities to increase profits and is solely financed by big corporations. Through our educational efforts using credible scientists, we believe the Food Safety Agency, the GMO Council and the Tuzla Canton authorities have come to recognize the potential of this research and likely will support the trial. Their support will be critical, as the farmers have already indicated they will rely on the food safety authorities' judgment.

Interestingly enough, during the presentation and discussions in Sarajevo and Tuzla, there were only a few questions about the potential danger of GE products from a public health perspective. The audience (including the farmers) asked questions that were quite sophisticated. The biggest concern was related to possible loss of the EU and Russian markets because of the existence of a biotech plum field trial in the vicinity of commercial orchards. Dr. Gasi and Dr. Zagrai explained that beyond a buffer zone of approximately 400 meters no "HoneySweet" pollen was found and therefore convinced producers that there would be no pollen flow to the commercial orchards.

As noted earlier, this was the first time that the media chose to provide neutral reporting on a biotech event. In fact, in an April 24 article after the Sarajevo event, the most popular Republika Srpska's (RS) daily newspaper "Nezavisne Novine" published a very positive article about the program despite the RS having a ban on the trade and cultivation of genetically engineered products.

### **Level of media coverage**

The US Embassy's Public Affairs Office provided press announcements to a wide range of media

outlets. At the Sarajevo event we had two news agencies “SENS” and the “Federation News Agency (FENA)” present, and one TV station “BN”. The Tuzla event was covered by the most popular agricultural bi-weekly show “Green Panorama” (yet to be aired on June 15). Dr. Zagrai, Dr. Gasi and Agricultural Counselor Christine Sloop provided statements to the press. The news that SENS and FENA agencies’ broadcasted related to the Sarajevo event was picked up by several web portals. Dr. Zagrai’s, Dr. Gasi’s and Counselor Sloop’s statements were also published on Youtube ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_umP6nAkPE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_umP6nAkPE) , <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOuThaQx3pg>, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXuS5E0dkNs> ).

A daily newspaper from Banja Luka “Nezavisne Novine” published a very positive article, which was particularly noteworthy as the Republika Srpska has a very restrictive stance on biotechnology.

“Nezavisne Novine” is the most popular newspaper in the RS and “FENA” covers the entire Federation, thus we can say coverage reached the entire country.



*Presentation and roundtable discussion in Sarajevo, April 23, 2014*



*Presentation and roundtable discussion in Sarajevo, April 24, 2014*





*Dr. Ioan Zagrai's TV interviews , April 23 and 24, 2014*



*Agricultural Counselor Sloop and Dr. Fuad Gasi's TV interviews , April 23 and 24, 2014*